

Interlude

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Interlude

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Summary

A momentary break as Tali and Ms. Chambers join the family and topics of alternate and mirror universes and all sorts of other fun stuff is thrashed out.

Notes

There's a lot of exposition here to 1) set the stage for the future and 2) to explain to those of you who might not be familiar with the Mass Effect universe some of the more important elements: The Rachni Wars, the Krogan Rebellion, broaching the topic of the genophage (we'll be going a lot more into that in an upcoming episode), the relationships of the old Normandy crew with Shepard--as you'll see in this and upcoming parts, in many ways, she has had an enormous impact on those around her--one that still reaches out from "the grave", and 3) We get into such issues as alternate universes and mirror universes, a little on time travel, and some other stuff that will come into play later. Things will pick up drastically in the next story where Cerberus scores another victory (gotta let the bad guys win some of the time). I hope everyone is enjoying this series and I welcome your comments and questions.

R.R.W. Gallena

"Keelah!" Tali gasped as she and Kal'Reegar, exited their shuttle and set foot for the first time on the flight deck of the Romulan warbird. "How are they able to keep an entire ship this size invisible?"

"I think I soiled my suit when I saw it appear." Reegar responded as the two quarians walked through the shuttle bay, escorted by the *Gallena's* executive officer. "What I want to know is why have we not heard of them before?"

"The Subcommander will answer all of your questions." Tovan replied, interrupting the quarians' conversation. "She is waiting for us in sickbay along with your friends, Ms. Nar Rayya..."

"Tali...please." The young quarian woman quickly responded as Liara gave her old friend a grin.

"Garrus and Joker are here as well, and Dr. Chakwas is taking care of Kaidan. From what I've been told, he is recovering well." Liara said reassuringly

"Good." Tali exclaimed, her broad smile hidden by the opaque face shield of her suit. "It has been too long since we were all together. All we are missing now are Wrex and Shep..." As Tali's voice trailed off in a stammer, Liara glumly picked up where her friend left off.

"Yes. I miss her too. As for Wrex...the last I heard he had his hands full on Tuchanka trying to get all the Krogan clans together."

Shaking her head as the group entered the turbolift, Tali remarked with a slight chuckle, "That is a lifetime job—even given a krogan's long life expectancy."

As the turbolift took them to their destination, the group remained quiet until the doors swished open. "This way." Tovan gestured as he led the two newcomers to the medical ward. Entering sickbay, Tali, on recognizing the turian standing next to the woman that she remembered as being the subcommander, shouted joyfully, "Garrus!"

“Hello, Tali.” The vigilante smiled as he caught sight of his old friend. “You remember Subcommander Avesti?”

“Subcommander.” Tali nodded her head slightly in acknowledgement as she gestured at the man lying on the bed. “How is he?”

“Why don’t you ask him yourself.” The subcommander, sounding both tired and relieved, responded as Tali approached.

“Hey, Tali.” Kaidan greeted in a weak voice as he gazed up at his old shipmate. “Heard you were joining us.”

Chuckling softly, the young quarian replied, “Yeah. I missed our talks, so when I heard you were on board, I couldn’t resist.”

“I still think the Logic Arrest is the best omnitool on the market.” Kaidan declared with a slight grunt and a twinkle in his eye.

“And I still think you’re a bosh’tet.” Tali laughed softly, “Everyone knows that the Nexus is better for running multiple attack processes simultaneously.”

“You two can have this debate later.” Dr. Chakwas decreed in a maternal voice. “Kaidan needs his rest. So that means everyone out of here—including you, Subcommander.”

“Aye, aye, Doctor.” V’lana replied with a slight grin on her face as she gingerly held Alenko’s hand. “I’ll be back after your nap.”

“Better be.” Kaidan smiled back as Dr. Chakwas placed a hypo to his neck.

“Come back in eight hours.” The doctor advised, “He should be feeling much better then.”

“Understood, Doctor.” The lovely Romulan acknowledged before speaking to the others, “Accompany me to my ready room. We can talk there.” Tapping her comm badge, she commanded, “Lieutenant Veril...Lieutenant Adams to my ready room.”

“On our way.” A youthful sounding female voice responded.

Smiling behind her opaque face mask, Tali remarked happily, “It will be good to see Chief Adams again.”

“Keelah!” Tali gasped as she and Kal exited the turbolift on to the bridge. Spotting a blue-skinned alien with white hair and antennae sitting at the helm next to Joker, the young quarian asked, “I’ve never seen his species before?”

“He’s an Andorian.” V’lana answered as a human wearing an Alliance uniform and a Reman wearing what appeared to be a blouse and leather pants and boots stood waiting patiently for them. “This is Veril, my chief engineer.” The subcommander inclined her head as she made introductions, “And I believe you are already acquainted with Lieutenant Adams?”

“Tali.” Adams grinned as he saw the young quarian. “How have you been?”

“Well, Chief.” Tali replied in a happy tone of voice, “And you.”

“Like a kid in a candy shop. I’m not chief here though. Lieutenant Veril has that honor. Please...” The human engineer insisted, “Call me Greg.”

“All right...Greg.” Tali enthusiastically replied, “I have heard so much about this ship on the shuttle ride from the surface—especially the engines.”

Adams responded with a gleeful look on his face, “If you thought the old *Normandy* was state of the art, wait until you see the engine room of this baby! It’s powered by an artificial singularity! Don’t ask me how they keep it contained. That...and the cloaking device...are the two things they won’t let us get near—much less touch.”

“We’re sorry about that...” V’lana interrupted with a rueful grin, “But...if it’s any consolation, we don’t even allow our allies in the Federation or the Klingon Empire to get a close look at them.” Her grin disappearing, she explained, “They give us our edge. Where we’re from, they’re pretty much all we have left. But...I’m sure that you can find plenty to keep you occupied.”

“She’s right, Tali.” The *Normandy*’s former chief engineer agreed. “They’re shorthanded on engineers—they took some casualties fighting a race they called the Hirogen who are bad news from what Veril has told me. There’s more than enough to keep you busy.”

“Lieutenant Adams is correct.” Veril affirmed as she introduced herself to her newest engineer. “I understand that you’re especially gifted where it concerns computer systems and relays. I think I can find a project that you’ll find both challenging and enjoyable.”

“I’m looking forward to it.” Tali replied, salivating at the chance to learn what she can from these newcomers to her universe.

“Before Veril and Lieutenant Adams take you away from me though...” V’lana interjected, “We need to talk about what you found on Haestrom and what’s happening to its sun.”

“Right.” Tali nodded her head. “I’ll tell you all I can, and I have my research notes and logs here...” She activated her omnitool. “Is there any way to download the information into your computers?”

“Yes.” The subcommander affirmed, “Satra...my science officer...can show you how.”

“Thank you.” Tali replied as she and the others filed into the ready room.

“Just have a seat somewhere and we’ll get started.” V’lana gestured to the couch and chairs as she sat down behind her desk. As her guests

took their seats, the subcommander directed Tovan and Satra to bring refreshments from the replicator. “Don’t worry.” The lovely Romulan grinned, “We can replicate dextro-safe foods and drinks.”

“Their beer isn’t too bad, Tali.” Garrus quipped as he walked over to assist the two Romulans. “Not quite up to Palaven standards, of course, but it’s still pretty tasty.”

Several minutes later, after a great deal of detailed explanations and question answering by both her and her science officer, the subcommander announced her intentions. “My immediate plans are to return to Illium. Ms. Lawson and Liara have informed me that there are two individuals we should look into recruiting into our little band.”

“Thane Krios and Samara.” Miranda interjected, explaining to the newcomers. “They were slated to join Shepard’s team had she...” pausing for a moment to allow the deceased N-7’s friends and shipmates a moment to grieve, the Australian biotic continued, “...the Illusive Man had them on his list of possible recruits for her crew. He felt that Krios’ skills as an assassin and Samara’s as a skilled biotic along with her abilities as a detective could have proved useful. I still think so.”

“If nothing else, by recruiting them, we deprive the Illusive Man of their potential services.” Garrus pointed out as V’lana nodded her head in agreement.

“That’s why we’re going after them.” The Romulan explained, “A shuttle containing another recruit should also be in the Illium system by the time we arrive there.”

“Who?” Tali inquired.

“She comes recommended by both Miranda and Councilor Anderson.” V’lana replied. “When we went through the anomaly that brought us to this universe, we were short a ship’s counselor—what you would call a psychologist. I’ve been informed that Ms. Chambers holds a doctorate in clinical psychology as well as potentially being a latent empath or telepath.”

“You mean she might be a weak biotic?” Reegar interrupted.

“More likely gifted psionically.” V’lana answered back with a shake of her head. “We have species on board that are natural empaths and telepaths such as Vulcans and a few Romulans such as myself.” The subcommander confessed, adding in conclusion, “Humans normally aren’t telepathic, but there have been rare cases. Ms. Chambers might be one of those exceptions.”

“You can read minds?” Tali exclaimed.

Smiling at the quarian, V’lana replied in a soothing tone, “I have to be in personal contact with the individual and, in truth, I can only pick up on surface thoughts and impressions. I’m no Betazoid and even Vulcans are far stronger than I am. Neilana, one of my security officers who is also Romulan, is a far stronger telepath, but even she’s weak by Betazoid standards. Don’t worry, most telepaths in my universe and the few of them on my ship have a strong sense of ethics where it concerns intruding into others’ thoughts. Also, other than Neilana, any other telepaths on the ship—myself included—are very weak. You’ll have no problems. I swear.”

“Thank you.” Tali replied in a low whisper, “I’m not sure I want someone looking into my mind—even if it is just surface thoughts.”

“I know I don’t want one digging into mine.” Kal’Reegar declared with a scowl.

“As I’ve said...” V’lana repeated in an effort to assure her new recruits, “You have my word that no one will go into your mind without your consent. Now, Tali, I believe you expressed some interest in seeing our engine room?”

“Yes!” Tali ecstatically exclaimed. “I’m dying to see that singularity. Can you at least tell me how you’re able to contain all that energy?”

Laughing, V’lana replied, “I’ll let Veril explain it all to you...or rather what she’s permitted to tell you. Right now though...we need to return to the subject of Haestrom’s star. Any idea on why its evolution has been accelerated?”

“None.” Tali shook her head. “Although, as I said, I do think it has something to do with dark energy.”

“Satra?” The subcommander asked, turning to her science officer, “Did you and Samantha find anything unusual in your scans?”

“We’re not sure.” The Romulan science officer admitted. “We detected a spike in chroniton particles for a brief moment...”

“Do you think it might have been from a time traveler?”

“Time travel?” Tali interjected, her eyes, hidden by her face shield, widening on hearing that. “You’re telling me that your people can travel through time?”

“It is possible.” V’lana admitted, “But also very risky.” Shaking her head, the lovely Romulan let out a breath of air. “We have rules and guidelines barring us from engaging in unnecessary time travel. The risks to the timeline...”

“Would be enormous.” Tali interrupted, completing the subcommander’s statement. “Even though it would be tempting to do something like going back in time and rescuing Shepard and the original *Normandy*...”

“It could dramatically change things.” Satra interjected, “And not necessarily for the better.”

“You also have to be careful about the butterfly effect.” Samantha added with a frown, further explaining to the newcomers as well as Garrus and Lieutenant Adams. “Let’s say that you go back to the Cretaceous period and accidentally kill a butterfly. No big deal on the surface, right?” As the two quarians nodded their heads in agreement, the Alliance specialist continued her explanation. “However, something as small as that could theoretically cause a tremendous change in the timeline.”

“Time travel’s a tricky thing.” V’lana affirmed, “We have found that time isn’t necessarily linear. Depending on the circumstances, an event could, instead of changing the timeline in our continuity, result in the creation of an entirely separate timeline.”

“Like what happened when Ambassador Spock used a small portion of red matter to create a black hole in an effort to absorb the energy created by the Hobus supernova. It failed to save Romulus, but in the process, it also caused a divergent timeline.” Tovan explained with a shake of his head.

“Right.” The subcommander agreed before inquiring of her science officer, “Not to mention the whole mess involving *Discovery*. We’re still trying to figure out what the story is on that.”

“Depends on who you’re asking at any given time.” Tovan interjected with a crooked grin.

“Right.” V’lana acknowledged with an equally ironic smirk, “Now you understand why all this talk of time and universe travel gives me headaches.” Returning to the topic under discussion, the subcommander inquired, “Did you pick up traces of red matter along with the chroniton particles?”

“We’re not sure.” Satra admitted through clenched teeth. “We’re still trying to sort through all the data we’ve accumulated.”

“Sat’s right.” Samantha declared, coming to the aid of her lover. “We’re hoping that the information Tali picked up on the surface might help us in nailing down something more specific.”

“I’ll help in any way I can.” Tali quickly volunteered.

“I hate to say this…” Satra grimaced, “But we could well be looking at a *Discovery* type situation.”

“Fuck!” V’lana cursed with frown. “If that’s the case then it might mean we’re dealing with Section 31, the Tal’ Shiar, and/or one or more Mirror Universes. None of those possibilities enthuse me.”

“Section 31? Tal’ Shiar? Mirror Universes?” Reegar interrupted. “Who or what are those?”

Heaving a dejected sigh, V’lana inclined her head to her executive officer who picked up immediately on his long-time friend’s intent.

“I’ll bring us some stronger drinks, Little Sister.”

“Thanks, Big Brother.” V’lana replied before addressing the gathering in her office, “You’re going to need the booze when you hear what we have to say. So…sit back and try to relax because this is going to take some time.”

After over an hour of explanation and watching the related recorded footage, Tali shook her head as feelings of wonder and foreboding cascaded within her. “Keelah…there’s so much. Mirror universes! Alternate universes! Just how many universes are there?”

“Potentially an infinite number.” Satra replied. “We know of at least two…maybe three…mirror universes where a Terran Empire exists and one where a Terran Empire exists that is most definitely not a Mirror Universe. Not to mention that most--if not all--of these consider themselves to be the ‘Prime’ timeline.”

“So…which one really is the Prime universe?” Garrus inquired with a skeptical grin, “Yours?”

“From my perspective…” V’lana smoothly responded, “Yes. But from yours…”

“Ours would be.” Miranda concluded with a single nod of her head. “It seems that it is all a matter of perspective.”

“How certain key events play out does seem to be a constant theme in the directions taken by the alternate universes.” Samantha concluded as a chart display appeared on the monitor. “The appearance of the *Defiant* from one or more of the prime universes at an earlier point in time and its subsequent exploitation by one or another of the Mirror Universe Terran Empires seems to be one of those key points of divergence. There’s a strong probability that there are similar points of divergence in our universe’s timeline. I think Virmire might be one such instance where Shepard had to make several difficult choices…”

“How so?” V’lana inquired as she took a sip of tulaberry wine.

Liara answered in a soft, mournful voice, “First…there was the matter of Wrex…”

“We discovered that the person we were pursuing, a rogue Council agent working with the Reapers by the name of Saren, had set up a cloning facility on Virmire where he was breeding krogans to serve as soldiers.” Garrus interjected, further elaborating, “The krogans rebelled against the Council several human centuries ago--shortly after the end of the Rachni Wars…”

“I read about those.” V’lana commented, “You were exploring what was on the other side of a newly discovered mass effect relay and literally--as the rachni are an insectoid race--stirred up an ant mound.”

“Right.” Garrus affirmed, nodding his head in agreement, “Only these…ants…came close to wiping everyone out. We couldn’t stop them, so the salarians discovered a hardy species with multiple redundancies that had slipped back into barbarism following a nuclear war…”

“The krogans.” Tovan interjected.

Nodding his head, Garrus continued, “The salarians uplifted them--gave them advanced technology--and then the Council used them as foot soldiers in pushing the rachni back. Without the krogans, we never would have stood a chance--they saved everyone’s asses.”

“So what happened?” V’lana asked, “What caused the krogans to rebel?”

Liara answered in a soft voice, "Because of the harsh conditions on their homeworld, krogans have a very high reproductive rate. Prior to the salarians uplifting them, the harsh environment and predatory wildlife on Tuchanka kept their numbers down. But after receiving advanced technology..."

"The...as the humans say...genie got let out of the bottle." Tovan finished with a sigh.

"It's shit like this that make me understand a little more why the Federation has their Prime Directive." V'lana commented, "So...the krogan population was bursting at the seams..."

"Correct." Garrus affirmed, picking up the narrative once again. "The Council promised the krogan that it would grant them worlds to colonize in exchange for their help with the rachni, so, after the war, the krogans wanted to collect on their debt and demanded that the Council honor the terms of their agreement."

"Let me guess..." V'lana sighed, "The Council said no."

"Got it no the first try." Garrus nodded, "The krogans rebelled and the Council found itself in another war for survival."

"So...how did it end?" Satra inquired.

"It ended when the salarians invented an artifical plague that they called the genophage and then my people--the turians--released it on Tuchanka. The krogan birth rate plummeted to such an extent to where they now have a population that is just viable."

"Shit." V'lana swore in a low voice, "I'm going to have to have a talk with Mordin about this soon. But that'll have to wait. For now..." she said, directing the conversation back to its original topic, we were talking about what happened on Vormire."

"Yes." Liara sighed, taking over the discussion, "Wrex got very upset because Shepard was going to destroy the cloning facility and he saw it as a cure of the genophage."

"I see." The subcommander nodded, "Continue."

"I have to admit..." Garrus interjected, "...I thought she or Gunnery Chief Williams was going to have to kill him. It didn't look like he was going to stand down. But...somehow or other, she talked him down."

"Shepard always tried to take the peaceful path." Liara interrupted, fondly recalling her memories of her old friend. "Unless she had no other choice, violence was always the last resort."

"I remember a conversation we had in the engine room of the old *Normandy*..." Tali remembered with a winsome tone to her voice, "It was right after Noveria. I talked to her about her decision to spare the Rachni queen that Saren was using to also breed a slave army."

"Yes." Liara, her expression now both somber and reflective, responded, "I was there along with Wrex when she decided to let the queen go. I thought Wrex was going to explode then too." Shaking her head, the beautiful asari maiden confessed, "I have to admit, I had my doubts about her decision also."

Nodding her head, Tali admitted, "I think we all did. Anyway, she explained to me that she did it because, in her words, 'If I'd have killed her, I'd never be able to sleep at night.' She said that this queen wasn't around at the time of the Wars and so shouldn't be blamed for them."

Liara's smiled fondly, "That was so typical of Shepard." Returning to the original topic, the asari archaeologist continued, "Vormire was also important because..."

Liara's lips turned up in a winsome smile, "That was so typical of Shepard." Returning to the communications officer's original topic, the asari archaeologist remarked, "Vormire was also important because Shepard had to choose whether to save Alenko or Gunnery Chief Williams as she was about to set off the nuclear bomb to destroy Saren's facilities."

Garrus interrupted, "Hard call to make." Garrus commented, shaking his head.

"And one that could easily lead to several different potential timelines." Satra declared, "Just as what happened to the *Defiant* led to multiple points of divergence. "In many timelines, Hoshi Sato took control of the ship and used it and its advanced technology to become Empress."

"While in other timelines..." Samantha continued, "...Archer was able to detect Sato's scheme in time and, after killing her, became Emperor. While in still others, Forrest maintained control. Just as in the case of Vormire, in some timelines, Shepard did, in fact, shoot Wrex..."

"Or chose to rescue Chief Williams instead of Kaidan..." Liara interjected, drawing a worried frown from V'lana. "Either event would have had a profound effect on the timeline."

"And, in all probability, divergent timelines did spawn from these events...as well as others." Satra explained, continuing her dissertation on the Mirror Universe. "Another point of divergence where the Mirror Universes are concerned was the point where Spock became aware of the Tantalus Field. In some timelines, he used it to become Emperor, initiating even more divergences..."

"While in still others, Kirk used the device creating still more timelines." Samantha interjected, finishing her lover's thoughts

"And there are other possibilities where the Vulcan/Andorian/Orion resistance held out against the Empire and took the *Defiant* for themselves, initiating still more parallel universes." Taking a deep breath, the Romulan science officer shook her head, "And we've just begun the process of mapping out the myriad iterations of so-called Prime timelines—including yours."

"So, Lola..." Vega interrupted, "What role did your people play in all these different mirror timelines?"

“It varies.” V’lana replied as the science officers once again took over the discussion.

“In many of them, we see a Romulan Alliance consisting of Romulans, Remans, dispossessed Vulcans, Orions, and other races...including some humans...charting a course very similar to that of the Federation. While in others, we withdraw into isolation. And in still others...” Satra’s voice trailing off, V’lana picked up where her science officer had left off.

“Both Romulus and Remus were scorched by the Empire, leaving what was left of our people scattered refugees.”

“Well, shit.” Garrus interjected and then inquired, “So...what part do you think groups like Section 31 play in all this?”

“There are remarkable similarities between this Section 31 and Cerberus.” Miranda noted.

“Not to mention the fact that Cerberus and the Mirror Terran Empires all share a common ideology—human supremacy.” Satra declared with a frown.

“Do you think elements of either your Section 31 and/or one of the Mirror entities managed to find their way here?” Liara inquired with a worried expression.

“We’re here—aren’t we?” V’lana responded with a frown of her own, “No reason to think they or others such as the Tal’ Shiar, the Elachi, the Borg, or any anyone else from a multitude of other universes didn’t find their way here too. And if they are here...and I think that’s highly likely...then we need to find out what they’re up to and stop it—ASAP.”

“No argument there.” Garrus replied, his mandibles flaring. “So...how are we going to do that?”

The subcommander decisively responded, “We continue with our current plans. We go to Illium. Pick up Krios and Samara before the Illusive Man can nab them like he did Jack, rendezvous with Kelly Chambers, and then we go to Tuchanka.”

“Tuchanka?” Garrus exclaimed, his eyes widening.

“Right.” V’lana replied with a sly grin, “I think it’s time I finally met your friend, Wrex.”

Poking Garrus in the ribs as they exited the subcommander’s office, Vega joked, “Looks like Lola’s getting the band back together.”

His mandibles flaring in the turian equivalent of an anticipatory grin, Garrus replied, “Yeah. Looks like.”

The Citadel—Systems Alliance Embassy, Councilor Anderson’s apartment

“Are you sure about this information, David?” Admiral Hackett, his image appearing on the human Councilor’s monitor, inquired, his face an expressionless mask.

“I believe so.” The Councilor replied, “It confirms information I’ve received from other sources. Not only did Cerberus build an improved version of the *Normandy*, it also apparently created a clone of Shepard.”

Shaking his head, Hackett dourly remarked, “Cerberus has plenty of support within the Alliance military and political structure. More than one admiral and Member of the Alliance Parliament are bought and paid for Cerberus agents.”

“You’re not telling me anything I don’t already know, Stephen.” Anderson snorted. “It wouldn’t surprise me if Udina was on their payroll. That’s why I’m talking to you from my apartment instead of my office.” Taking a deep breath and exhaling, the councilor pondered, “The Illusive Man gives orders for the prisoner Shepard took from Purgatory to be taken to a top secret research station...”

“Were you able to get the coordinates for the station, David?” Hackett inquired, “We could send a stealth ship to investigate...”

“Nice idea...” Anderson chuckled, “But I’m afraid not. My source was unable to provide that information.” Taking a deep breath, the former Alliance officer continued, “What concerns me just as much is that secret research station on Aite. The concept of fusing a human mind with a VI...” the councilor shook his head, “...that scares me.”

“Me too.” Hackett agreed, “So...do we pass this on to our new allies?”

“Might not be a bad idea.” Anderson concurred, “They might be able to figure something out—maybe they’ve encountered something similar in their universe.”

Nodding his head, Hackett affirmed the councilor’s decision. “All right. Clue them in. Keep me posted, David.”

“Take it easy out there, Stephen.” Anderson replied as he closed the connection. Taking a sip of bourbon, the human ambassador tapped a button on his console, “Anderson to *Gallena*...”

Cerberus Frigate Normandy

“So, what’s our new mission, Sir?” The redheaded Commander Shepard asked, her holographic form speaking directly to the holographic

image of her superior who was currently sitting in his chair smoking a cigarette, his dusky-skinned assistant at his side.

“This mission entails multiple objectives.” The Illusive Man replied as he flicked the ash growing on his cigarette tip into an ashtray. “I need you to go to Korlus. The Blue Suns under the command of Jedore have been using a krogan scientist by the name of Okeer in an effort to breed krogan supersoldiers.”

“So, you want me to take out Okeer and Jedore.” Shepard concluded as a slight smile of anticipation appeared on her face.

“That is part of your mission.” The Illusive Man affirmed, “If you can secure Okeer’s willing cooperation, then retrieve him, but if that is not possible, then I need you to retrieve his research. His work could prove invaluable in our efforts in accomplishing our primary objectives. Those notes could be the key in ensuring human supremacy. It also has the side benefit of sending a message to the Blue Suns after the fiasco on Purgatory that Cerberus will not tolerate betrayal.”

“Understood.” The clone acknowledged. “If there are no further instructions, we’ll be on our way.”

Nodding his head in satisfaction, the Illusive Man gave his consent, “Good hunting, Shepard.”

Exiting the conference room, Shepard addressed her executive officer, “Alert the team to be prepared to move out. We’ve just received new orders.”

“Aye, Commander.” Kai Leng acknowledged, “We’ll be ready.”

“Destination, Commander?” EDI inquired as Shepard made her way to the galaxy map.

“Korlus.”

Illium System—Alliance Courier Vessel

“Good flying back there.” Kelly Chambers said, smiling at the pilot of the small courier vessel. “It looked for a while like those Batarian pirates almost had us.”

“Thank you, Ma’am.” The pilot replied modestly. “They’ve been more active recently. Good thing I installed those new sensors.”

“So...have you met any of these ‘Romulans’ before?” Kelly prompted as she probed for more information about the new aliens.

“Yes, Ma’am.” The pilot responded. “I was piloting the shuttle that picked up the prisoners they were holding.” Shaking his head in amazement, he recalled, “That ship of theirs...I couldn’t believe how it suddenly just...”

The young man stopped speaking mid-sentence as a large ship looking like a raptor suddenly appeared in front of them. Several moments later, after he had collected himself, the pilot finished, pointing at the newcomer, “...did that!”

“That’s the ship?” Kelly, mouth agape, gasped as she gazed at the warbird bathed in what seemed to be a pale green light. “I gotta go and change my underwear. I think I just pissed my pants.”

The pilot laughed. “They did the same thing the first time. Scared the shit outta me too.” As a light on his console blinked, the pilot advised, “That’s them on the horn.” Pressing a button, he spoke in a clear voice, “This is Alliance courier *Hermes* to R.R.W. *Gallena*. I’ve got a passenger for you.”

“Great, Sugar!” A voice speaking with a clear Southern U.S. accent replied. “We’ll beam her over when ya’ll are ready.”

“Thanks, Ellie!” The pilot responded, “Give us a few so that she can get her shit together and I’ll comm you back.”

“Sure thing, Kevin. Just give us a holler. The Boss ain’t in a hurry right now.”

“Was that a southern accent I just heard.” Kelly inquired with a shake of her head.

“Yup.” The pilot responded with a grin. “Comes from Baton Rouge in her universe. We got a bet going on the big LSU-Ohio State game coming up.” Chuckling as his passenger turned to go pick up her gear, the pilot quipped, “You might wanna empty your bladder again before you pack.”

“Why?” Kelly asked with a slight hitch to her voice.

“Cause if you don’t, you’re liable to ruin another pair of underwear.” The pilot laughed.

“I think I’ll be okay.” His redheaded passenger joked back, “I think I dumped everything when that ship appeared out of nowhere.”

“Okay...but don’t say I didn’t warn you.” The pilot joshed, “Let me know when you’re ready and I’ll comm Ellie and we’ll get you on your way to your new home.”

“Be ready in a couple. I just gotta pack a bag or two.” Kelly answered back. A few minutes later, the redhead returned, “All right. I’m ready.”

Activating his comm, the pilot spoke, “*Hermes* to *Gallena*. Ms. Chambers is ready.” Chuckling, he quipped, “Be nice to her, and I can’t wait for that steak dinner you’re gonna cook for me, Ellie, after the Buckeyes beat your team.”

“Sugar...” The southern voice responded, “Ya’ll better get ready to take me out to that Cajun restaurant you told me about when my Tigers whip your Yankee boys’ asses. I got me a hankering for some jambalaya.” After a moment, Ellie’s voice again came from the speaker, “Ms. Chambers? We’re transporting you aboard now.”

“What does she mean?” Kelly began as she felt her body suddenly start to tingle. “What the...”

Moments later, the redheaded psychologist found herself standing...somewhere else...as she was greeted by a now familiar southern accented voice. “Welcome to the *Gallena*, Ms. Chambers.”

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